

Digging ever deeper for water

Attitudes are changing in the Klamath Basin, but a town's dry well is another alarm bell

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The city well serving the Southern Oregon farm community of Merrill ran dry shortly after midnight last Wednesday, only nine days into what promises to be a long summer in the Klamath Basin.

The townspeople of Merrill knew that sometime this summer they would turn on their taps and no water would appear. Gov. Ted Kulongoski had visited the basin in early June and promised that the Oregon National Guard would, if necessary, deliver emergency water to Merrill.

Merrill is surrounded by fields of potatoes, alfalfa and other thirsty crops, and yet again, there's not nearly enough water in nearby Klamath Lake to provide farmers with the irrigation water they need. Even with Oregon's wet spring, many Klamath farmers have spent weeks pumping groundwater to keep their crops alive.

That has dropped the basin's water table below the pump of Merrill's city well. Late last week, a crew worked to lower Merrill's pump another 40 feet in hopes of tapping another few months of water supplies for the city.

The falling underground water table ought to fix everybody's attention in the Klamath Basin, where there's never enough water to go around, and where the community remains deeply divided over a broad compromise, known as the Klamath Basin Resource Agreement, that is meant in part to end the region's water wars.

The KBRA, a product of years of negotiations, seeks to remove four Klamath River dams, restore the river's health and salmon runs, and provide a new level of certainty about the amount of irrigation water delivered to farmers whose land is included in the

Klamath Project. The agreement requires approval and tens of millions of dollars of funding from Congress.

Longtime Klamath Project farmers such as Jim Carlton, who met with Kulongoski's during his recent tour of the basin, strongly favor the KBRA. "At least then I've have some guarantee of water," Carlton told the governor. However, farmers who get their water from sources other than the Klamath Project are skeptical about the benefits of the agreement. And throughout the rural, conservative basin, there's broad opposition to breaching the four Klamath dams.

The local politics surrounding the KBRA are as heated as the summer weather in the Klamath. In the May primary election, voters swept out one of the longest serving members of the Klamath County Commission, John Elliott, who was among the strongest supporters of the KBRA.

Suspicion and distrust run deep in the Klamath Basin, and much of the opposition to the KBRA reflects a history of frustration with the government agencies and environmental groups that have also signed on to the agreement.

But the critics of the KBRA ought to take a long look around the dusty basin this summer and see the promise inherent in an agreement to resolve almost a century of disputes over water. Already, the basin has seen some of the benefits of cooperation, with water-sharing, land idling and other efforts softening the financial blow of this year's drought. But that dry well in Merrill is a reminder that still more must change in the Klamath. Digging ever deeper for water is not the answer.

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